

## **Decision of the Lexington Conservation Commission Regarding Proposed Regulations for Willard's Woods**

**June 22, 2010**

Having studied the issues brought to our attention regarding over-use and off-leash dogs at Willard's Woods, including the Land Management Subcommittee's final report and the recent public hearing, the Conservation Commission makes the following decision:

Based on our experience, evidence and testimony we've heard, we find that under current conditions the conflicts among users are at an unacceptable level, with the result that many people have chosen to stop going to Willard's Woods, or do not find it the pleasant experience they once enjoyed. We believe the most practical way in the near-term to reduce these conflicts is to provide separate times for off-leash dog owners and those who wish to avoid off-leash dogs to enjoy the Woods. Therefore our decision is to implement, for 6 months beginning on September 1, draft regulation 1b, which requires that dogs may be walked off-leash on weekdays if under the immediate restraint and control of their owner or keeper, and must be on-leash on weekends.

We also conclude that a permit system deserves serious consideration for Willard's Woods. The Land Management Subcommittee identified both advantages and disadvantages to a permit system and indicated a willingness to consider it further. In addition, there is strong interest as expressed at the public hearing. Any permit system must do more than limit users by residence or ability to pay: it must also include a strong educational component and be developed in tandem with a clearer definition of "immediate restraint and control" which we believe is a major component of the user conflicts that are being experienced. We will appoint a small task force to explore further whether a permit system can be designed that meets the needs of all parties and to make a recommendation to the Commission no later than 6 months after the implementation of draft regulation 1b.

We know there will be many on both sides of the issue who will be unhappy with this decision. We ask everyone to understand that:

- we impose this regulation in the spirit of finding a compromise that responds to the legitimate interests of all parties;
- the Conservation Commission is committed to making public conservation land available for all to use safely and enjoyably in a manner that doesn't endanger its conservation values; and
- as a community we need to respect and accommodate each other, and to share equitably the conservation land that we all seek to enjoy.

The Commission will revisit this regulation within 6 months to determine if possible changes, including the feasibility of a permit system are needed. In the meantime, all existing town and conservation regulations remain in effect.

Finally, we endorse the other recommendations of the subcommittee's report, related to trail and parking improvements, signage, education, communication, and funding, and ask staff to work with the Commission and with users of the Woods to implement these as quickly as feasible. And while we recognize that some users of Willard's Woods are not interested in a more traditional fenced dog park, others may be, and we encourage those interested to pursue the feasibility of establishing one or more in town, and stand ready to work with them on any issues related to wetlands, environmental impact, and conservation land.